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ABSTRACT

American literature has served not only to help establish, define, and reinforce the American Myth, but has been used to question, to challenge, and to redefine it as well. The dialogic relationship between the literature and the myth thus can become the starting point for a course that encourages closer examination of the process of interpretation and canonization. To approach this process in one course, students are asked to ground their interpretative networks by examining text in terms of the following variables: the relationship of the individual to self, family, society, and social institutions; the individuals search for personal identity and meaning; the question of personal versus social responsibility; and the use of the literature as a vehicle for social criticism. To further ground their analysis, students are presented with a variety of traditional interpretations from the criticism. Instructors try to help students acquire an awareness of their own unique background and of the role of that and of prejudice in the process of interpretation. By developing a sense of literature as they work, students can see that the individual texts help define/redefine the myth and the canon helps perpetrate it. Finally, the course is divided into 2 interrelated parts: traditional writers and contemporary authors, demonstrating that minority authors can be used to challenge the controlling myth as effectively as traditional, canonized writers. Thus non-canonical minority literatures can be incorporated with the more traditional literatures to the enrichment of both. (PRA)

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Elsa Saeta

Asking sophomore literature students to define the American Myth often proves a more difficult task than anticipated. However, after some prodding and quiet humming of "The Star Spangled Banner," students will ultimately generate a list of the characteristics which they believe define the national mythos. As conceptualized by contemporary college students, the American Myth represents America as the new world--a place of new beginnings and of unlimited opportunities; . . . the New Eden--a new promised land--a place whose destiny to serve as a shining example to the rest of the world had been pre-ordained by God; . . . the melting pot--a place where different nationalities, religions, and races merged to form a new distinctive culture.

Significantly, the students present a view of the mythos which incorporates both sides of the definition: "the embodiment in myth of a people's beliefs and fears arising out of past experience." Students define the Myth not only in terms of the positive qualities, but many also acknowledge the negative traits as well. America as a land of unlimited, if not-always-equal, opportunity; . . . a place whose God-given destiny includes serving as the world's morality police; . . . a place where national, religious, and racial differences were sacrificed in order to safeguard cultural hegemony.

One of the most enlightening experiences for many of my students is their discovery that the mythos is fundamentally

related to the national literature. Perhaps one of the biggest shocks to them is the additional discovery that the roots of the still-contemporary Myth can be traced back to the very early literature--to works by Captain John Smith, John Winthrop, Jean deCrevecoeur, and Benjamin Franklin. Once students have made that connection, the relationship between the literature and the mythos can be further elaborated to demonstrate how the literature has served not only to help establish, define, and reinforce the myth, but how at different times and under different circumstances, the literature has been used to question, to challenge, and to redefine it. The dialogic relationship between the literature and the myth thus becomes the starting point for a closer examination of the process of interpretation and canonization.

If the literature is at least partially a tool of cultural preservation and transmission, then canonization becomes a political tool--one which serves to perpetuate the traditional structure underlying a culture. Since this tradition forms an integral part of an individual's perception of his cultural and personal identity, an appreciation of both interpretation and canonization is a tool students need to understand not only their views of the literature, but their views of themselves as well. But, before being able to move onto an examination of the socio-political ramification of the canon, students must first be able to comfortably approach the process of interpretation.

Having established the American myth as the contextualizing

superstructure within which to frame their analysis, students are now ready to begin to develop their own interpretive networks. Incorporated within the unifying myth is an essentially even more fundamental idea which is an important part of the interpretive process: tradition. Human beings exist in time and place and are therefore embedded in tradition. Because "we always stand within tradition," Hans-Georg Gadamer believes it represents an essential component of interpretation. Since interpretation does not occur inside a groundless vacuum, students learn to work within a set of fairly traditional thematic universals.

They are asked to ground their interpretive networks by examining the text in terms of the following variables: the relationship of the individual to self, . . . to family, . . . to society, . . . to social institutions; the individual's search for personal identity, . . . for meaning; the question of personal responsibility vs social responsibility; the use of the literature as a vehicle for social criticism. Tying their interpretations to the universals is an important first step for students.

To further ground their analysis, students are presented with a variety of traditional interpretations from the criticism. The criticism serves as a base to allow students to develop their own readings of texts while working within a broader interpretive tradition. Being able to work within a flexible structure allows students the freedom to develop their own readings while minimizing the possibility of completely invalid trips to the

interpretive Twilight Zone.

Another of the goals of the class is to help students acquire an awareness of their own unique background and of the role of that uniqueness and of "prejudice" in the process of interpretation. Gadamer believes that historical man always sees from his standpoint in time and place and that human nature is inherently constituted by history. Critics like E. D. Hirsch, who work within a methodological framework, believe that the meaning of a text is determinate and unchanging; therefore, meaning is constant regardless of time or place. Critics, like Gadamer, who work within an ontological framework, recognize that meaning changes; consequently, meanings which are construed at different times will be different. Since understanding is grounded in and constituted by a concrete, historical, linguistic event, Gadamer insists that the interpreter not only cannot, but must not, seek to disregard himself and the effects of his particular hermeneutic situation. Rather, than attempt to bracket his own experiences, the student/reader must remain critically aware that interpretive understanding is conditioned by prejudices--pre-understandings that arise out of his complex, historical situation.

Each generation looks at the past from a different perspective and that perspective is in part defined by the present - including the present literature. Jerome Beaty and Paul Hunter, editors of a non-traditional anthology, suggest that in order to be able to read "the great works of the past and to

make them a meaningful part of our own lives and experience, most of us need first to be enthralled and informed by the works of our own time and tradition" (xii). One of the strengths of Gadamer's philosophy is that it emphasizes the crucial function of the present, historical situation: the present can help make the past more accessible and therefore more meaningful.

According to Gadamer, every interpretation is governed by the concrete situation of the interpreter. So rather than strive toward the one, determinate, immutable, self-identical meaning of a text, students are encouraged to work toward an application of the text to their own situation. Students are encouraged to develop an attitude which generates not an objective recounting of the text, but a dialogic engagement with it.

Although initially intimidated by the relatively open-ended freedom afforded by this process, with practice, students begin to integrate the various parts of the process and soon develop a fairly well defined interpretive network. As they gain confidence in themselves as critical readers, students continue to work with a wide range of critical opinions to help focus their analysis of texts as diverse as Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and Tim O'Briens' "Speaking of Courage."

Developing a sense of the literature as they work, students begin to appreciate the relationship between the individual texts, the myth, and the canon: the individual texts help define/redefine the myth and the canon helps perpetuate it. Slowly students also begin to visualize the evolution of the

canon: historically, the canon has changed to reflect changes in the mythos. As the myth evolves and changes in response to external challenges, the canon must also change to accommodate these challenges and incorporate new texts: texts which meaningfully address a new facet of the evolving myth.

To help students gain an appreciation for the diversity of our culture, the course is divided into two interrelated parts: the first dealing primarily with traditional writers like Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Chopin, and the second focusing on more contemporary authors like Simon Ortiz, Linda Hogan, Ernest Gaines, Alice Walker, Lorena Cervantes, and Tim O'Brian.

Contemporary challenges to the American myth, evidenced by a broadening definition of the roles of women and minorities, bring with them corresponding challenges to the traditional canon. If the canon is to accurately reflect the society which our students must confront, then it must be flexible enough to include the non-traditional literatures. Since the canonized literature helps shape and perpetuate the fundamental, defining myth of a culture, it must be broad enough to encompass all of the voices which have combined to produce the uniqueness of that culture.

Oftentimes, based on past experiences, many minority students feel alienated from the dominant culture - excluded from participating fully in the mainstream American Dream. To help overcome their fears of exclusion, of minimalization, students may look to the literature for validation. Many come hoping to find like voices, similar experiences, shared realities which may

help provide a sense of their relationship to the mainstream. Incorporating the experiences of minority writers in the classroom, helps provide a sense of legitimacy, of acceptance, and perhaps even of pride.

Gadamer's comments about the establishment of the classical canon can be extrapolated and applied to the entire process of canonization. Gadamer believes the establishment of the canon represents "a living tradition which does not simply preserve what exists, but acknowledges it as a model and passes it on as an example to be followed."

An example to be followed . . . this concept raises important issues. To warrant attention, should the minority literature have to follow the traditions established by the canon? If so, how should their relative success be measured? Judged by certain traditional, aesthetic criteria, much of the non-canonical literature admittedly falls short. However, judged from different interpretive criteria--judged in terms of their relevance, and their accessibility, these same texts compare favorably to the standard canonical core. An individual's relationship to self and society can be as successfully demonstrated in a non-canonical text about Vietnam by Tim O'Brien as in a canonized text by Herman Melville. Students can learn to examine the nature of family relationships in Helena Viramontes' "The Moths" as well as in Kate Chopin's The Awakening. The literature can be used to challenge the controlling myth as effectively by contemporary minority writers as it has by

traditional, canonized writers.

The complicated question of revising the canon is in many ways beyond the scope of this paper. The narrower issue of expanding the academic canon to incorporate the minority literatures is not. The purpose of this paper is not to convince people to accept the necessity of opening the canon, but to show how the non-canonical minority literatures can be incorporated with the more traditional literatures to the enrichment of both.

Remembering that the canon at least partially represents an example to be followed, perhaps we should ask ourselves which example do we want followed? The example of institutionalized exclusion or of growing acceptance and integration? Personally, the affirmation to this teaching approach came when during one class reading of Ernest Gaines' A Gathering of Old Men, many of my students expressed amazement at the thought that such racist attitudes could still exist today. Coupled with that amazement and indignation was a resolve that such barbarism should not continue. That is the example I want my students to follow.

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